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STEVENSON'S PRAYER-BOOK.

BY RICHARD BURTON, PROFESSOR OF ENGLISH LITERATURE IN THE
UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA.

I DRAW from its handsome case of green crushed levant a little book, faded from its original proud purple to a nondescript brown, and entitled "Family Prayers," by the author of "The Faithful Promiser," "Morning and Night Watches," etc. The publisher's imprint is that of James Nesbit & Company, London, the year of publication 1853. A commonplace volume, surely, whether one looks to external garb or literary content. A prayer-book of over half a century ago, bound in sober cloth, undistinguished in paper, print or binding, is no such matter.

But stay, gentle reader. We are not come to the heart of this business yet. Human associations gather about this ordinary volume to give it spiritual significance. It is the most precious item in my library. For on a blank page is written, in a large flowing hand, the name of Thomas Stevenson; and turning to the fly-leaf (already with a quiver, mayhap, of expectation), one discovers a visiting-card affixed thereon which reads:

Mr. Robert Louis Stevenson, Athenæum Club, Skerryvore, Bournemouth.	London.
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By this time those who are sealed of the tribe of Tusitala know full well why this homely book is to its owner of inestimable worth; and, forsooth, an object of interest to all bibliophiles the world over. Stevenson's father, as the signature shows, acquired

the volume presumptively when his famous son was a mere lad—for he was but three when it was published. And in the fulness of years, when Louis was a young man already beginning to drift from the orthodoxy embodied in the Prayer-Book, it came into his possession and was apparently used much and made his own, as the pages with their pencilled marks in his own handwriting testify. Inserted between the leaves are sundry ferns, which upon expert botanical analysis reveal themselves as tropical beyond peradventure, and so point to the conclusion that Stevenson had the volume with him in the final years in Samoa; while the visiting-card suggests his possession of it in an earlier portion of his career. The volume also contains, to augment its interest and value, two sheets of mourning letter-paper, upon which are inscribed, in the elder Stevenson's large hand: "Passages of Scripture to be read in connection with each other"; the references which follow filling five pages, now yellowed by time. Furthermore, there is at least one insertion in the son's hand, while certain pencilled additions in yet another hand suggest the novelist's mother,—that devoted mother who so valiantly followed him to the far-lying Southern islands which were to be his "long home."

With this Prayer-Book before us, how easy to conjure up a picture of the family group in the Heriot Street house in the central part of gray old Edinburgh. That residence—"a substantial house of gray stone built with the solidity so customary in Scotland; looking across the Queen Street Gardens, where the lilacs bloomed in spring and the pipe of the blackbird might be heard, while from its back windows could be seen the hills of the Kingdom of Fife"—was the third occupied by the Stevensons during the life of Louis. Thither they removed when he was seven, and it is that mansion which, amply described by him and others, we associate with the writer, boy and man. In an upper story was his small suite of rooms, one of them originally his nursery; it was here he grew up, attended not only by his mother, but by Cummy, that wonder among nurses, whose memory is so fragrantly intertwined with those flowers of the imagination, "*A Child's Garden of Verses*." In this house, doubtless, God-fearing and regular as it was, the prayers in the little brown book must have been read aloud many a morning, delivered with all the picturesque unction we know Thomas Stevenson to have possessed, from more than one description left by the son. One longs to

find in the mass of *memorabilia* which Robert Louis gave to the world some direct chronicle of this book, some hint of its use or token of its presence. But none such, I fear, can be found; at any rate, my search has been in vain. It must remain for the mind's eye to see the Heriot Street group listening from day to day to the words of worship drawn from the "Family Prayers."

The visiting-card, witnessing to the fact that in due time the little volume passed from father to son, is also an evocation; it recalls a three years' section of his life, momentous to himself and, in truth, to late nineteenth-century letters. It was the period of his mid-manhood, when, from thirty-four to thirty-seven years of age, he lived the life of an invalid at Bournemouth, in the house which his father, then fast aging towards death, had presented to Mrs. Stevenson, and upon which the name "Skerryvore," signifying the most beautiful of the lighthouses built of the family firm, had been appropriately bestowed. Stevenson, with that pathetic capacity of his for pleasure in the good things of fortune, had been vastly delighted over this gift and enjoyed to the utmost the family installation in their new demesne. It is described by Mr. Balfour as "a modern brick house, closely covered with ivy; from the top windows it was possible to catch a glimpse of the sea. There was one-half an acre of ground, very charmingly arranged, running down from the lawns at the back, past a bank of heather, into a chine or small ravine full of rhododendrons and at the bottom a tiny stream." As for the author's childlike delight in the house, take this very characteristic bit from the Letters: "Our drawing-room is now so beautiful that it's like eating to sit in it. No other room is so lovely in the world; there I sit like an old Irish beggar-man's cast-off bauchle in a palace throne-room. Incongruity never went so far; I blush for the figure I cut in such a bower."

From the view-point of literary creation, this fragment of his life was one of the most brilliant—perhaps the most brilliant—of his whole career. It was during these three years at Skerryvore that he gave forth the "Child's Garden," "Prince Otto," "Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde" and "Kidnapped"—a quartette hardly to be matched by any other four books he produced. But, alas! his health steadily declined; seldom was he able to go up to London and make use of The Athenæum Club, of which, as his card indicates, he was a member, there to meet Colvin, per-

haps, or Lang or Henley, friends and cronies all. For the most part, he could not pass the confines of his own grounds. Hemorrhages were frequent and violent; an enemy "who was exciting at first, but has now, by the iteration of his strokes, become merely annoying and inexpressibly irksome," is his own comment.

Then, too, his father, who came down with his wife to live at Bournemouth in the autumn of 1886, in order to be near the son for the ensuing winter, rapidly failed and died in the next spring, his condition, mental as well as physical, being sad indeed. So that Stevenson's day darkened at this time in more ways than one. So poorly was he that, when summoned to Edinburgh by his father's passing, he went there, but was unable to attend the funeral because of a severe cold he had contracted. Yet the impression one gets of this period from the Letters, and from various other biographical testimony, is by no means one of gloom or discouragement; the incorrigible zest of life was always there: the keen interests, the gayety, the nobler interpretation of that "Sufficient-unto-the-day" creed which is so valuable for this workaday world. Dear friends of his—men like Henley and Fleeming Jenkins—were often at Skerryvore, and many were the revels and junketings of which it was the centre, despite the frailty of the Master. And to end with the brighter side, it was the books begun or completed at Bournemouth upon which his reputation most securely rests. The imagination kindles at the thought that, could we have sat with Stevenson in his much-admired drawing-room, or still better, beside his bed up-stairs during one of the enforced sojourns in "the land of counterpane," we might have picked up casually from the nearest table the little prayer-book now before us. Surely it had tales to tell of Skerryvore and its doings. Often it must have been in hand, one deems; as likely as not it was read from daily, in private devotion or family worship—we know such to have been the Samoan habit, and the proximity of the parents in that last Bournemouth winter makes it the more probable. But the brown book, however lovingly entreated, will not unlock its secrets. We must content us with inference and guess.

In view of his own unique series of fourteen prayers written for household use at Vailima, valued alike by the lovers of literature and the devotees of religious aspiration, Stevenson's ownership and use of this paternal volume takes on a special significance.

One's curiosity is piqued by the question whether, in any traceable way, he was influenced by the family heirloom in the penning of his own petitions. Were there unconscious echoes of the cadences falling so early on his ear, in the more perfect prose rhythms of the prayers he wrote while he lived in the South Seas? It hardly seems whimsical to believe that there may be some connection between the two: for his cousin, Mrs. Napier, writes: "In the Vailima prayers I seem to hear again an old melody that I know well—the echo of his father's words and daily devotions." It would be going too far to assume that this refers only to the impromptu contributions to the home worship by Thomas Stevenson. It may well be that the prayers of this very volume were in mind. There are, at the end of the book of "Family Prayers," a dozen prayers for specific occasions, and it is but natural to read these side by side with Stevenson's own, in the hope that some parallel may be discovered suggesting direct influence. But no such result follows. Indeed, Stevenson's contribution to precatory literature is distinguished above all else by its unconventional handling, its complete dismissal of the orthodox terminology and mental attitude which characterize the "Family Prayers"; and also by its special adaptation to the setting of the habitat at Vailima—as illustrated, for example, by the two prayers entitled "In Time of Rain." No more striking illustration of the difference between the elder and younger generation in the matter of religious faith and religious consolation could be found than that afforded by these two sets of invocations. Reading those composed by Stevenson, one feels that for the man of our day there have come, verily, a new heaven and a new earth. And one also feels that in the spirit of worship, although the form be changed, the new is full as vital and deep as the old. It is the personal, the individualistic note you hear, as against the traditional and associative in the things of God.

But there are other features worth mentioning about the copy of "Family Prayers." Noticeable at a first reading is the excellence of its manner, the harmonious, even high beauty of the language in which it is couched. The prayers are independent in form of the unsurpassed English Book of Common Prayer; but for taste, fitness and literary felicity they are such as one would expect a household like the elder Stevenson's to accept with sympathy. One can easily believe that so fastidious an artist of word

and phrase as the son would have been loath, even for purposes of religion and with whatever glamour of parental inheritance, to use a book, as he evidently used this one, which did not possess value of text as well as of tone. Albeit the orthodoxy of the volume is soundly old-fashioned, there is naught of the cheap and common to offend the taste.

One also notes the frequent work of the pencil, dividing off portions of a particular prayer as of special worth or application; and this expression of preference is interesting. A little examination shows that the impromptu editor, whether father or son, has invariably chosen what was most happy in manner or noblest in thought and feeling. Several times, for example, in an invocation for the welfare of the family, the allusion to the servants is stricken out. Thus: "Bless the members of this household. May they walk before Thee with a perfect heart. May the young be enabled to adorn the doctrine of God their Saviour in all things. May the servants be enabled to live out and act the lofty motto, 'We serve the Lord Christ.'" The final sentence is erased. Again, in another prayer, the text reads: "Bless us who are now surrounding Thy foot-stool, whether as master or servants"; and, as before, the final clause is pencilled through.

Does this mean that in the Edinburgh home the kitchen folk were not bidden into the fore-room worship; or that Stevenson down in the Samoan Islands, with his dusky servitors around him, did not wish to use the servile word? For it is not unlikely that this book was commonly read in the Vailima house before its master had indited his own prayers, or that they were merely supplementary to it. Whatever be the truth, there is a pleasant thought in the avoidance of the word suggestive of servitude.

Full of interest to the student of literature are the occasional comments and corrections that look to an improvement in the form of these printed prayers; just what we might have expected from Stevenson, whose ear was so sensitive to the subtleties of English speech. We should not wish the author of the "Christmas Sermon," "Prince Otto" and "Weir of Hermiston" to overlook, even in the mood of essential imploration, the distinction between "shall" and "will," "should" and "would"—a distinction, by the way, which the modern newspaper is rapidly obliterating from the public consciousness.

It has been said that the Scotch, as compared with the English,

are insensitive to this difference in speech forms; an idea which the student of historical English can easily rebuke and which the habit of the finest Scotch writers—Scott, Burns, Carlyle and Stevenson—shows to be unsound. Certainly Stevenson was as exquisitely responsive to such *nuances* of style as is the highly trained musician to close harmonies. In three places he has, plainly in his own hand, stricken out of the word “would” the initial letter and substituted the letters necessary to make it “should”; thereby changing a mood of volition to one of conditional futurity, where the latter was clearly the intention of the pious framer of the prayers. It is characteristic of Stevenson to take offence at this little jar, one of the imperfections of expression which, it may be feared, many to-day even of the writing craft could have let go by without a protest—and small wonder in view of the shoddy English dinned incessantly into our ears! It will do no harm to quote these passages that the illustrations in their altered form may be before the reader:

“Had it not been for this inconceivable stoop from the infinite, where *should* we have been this day?” A little reflection will show that conditional futurity, not modified willing, is what the Prayer-book means to convey, and therefore “should” is alone correct. And again: “Were we to be judged by the duties and doings, the sins and shortcomings, of any one day of the passing year, we *should* be righteously condemned.” Here the intended expression of futurity is secured by the change. Once more in the sentence: “Where *should* we be at this hour, O *God*,” etc., the pious author wished merely to imply futurity, not desire, hence Stevenson’s substitution is perfectly sound. The interesting point in the three cases is, we may reiterate, the indication that even in what may be called the non-literary mood, the trained ear and the nice taste of the great essayist and story-maker could not abide false notes.

Several other changes or interpolations are likewise of interest. In one case the text reads: “We come anew on this the evening of Thy Holy Day,” and there is an insertion after “We come” to make it read: “We come before Thee,” the gain in correctness being obvious; here the instinct of the stylist is again at work.

A grossly careless passage which is set right is the following: “Let each feel that we have some work to perform”; the amended reading, of course, being: “Let each feel that he *has*,” etc. And

in another place, where the original runs: "May they repose their bleeding bosoms on Him"—which smacks of the crude anthropomorphic imagery of the older theology—the objectionable words, "their bleeding bosoms," are erased.

These are the only emendations, and the small number testifies in itself to the generally admirable style of this manual for family worship which was so long in the Stevensons' possession. The book had to run a double gauntlet, for Thomas Stevenson, too, was a man of most fastidious literary taste.

How we would like to have revealed to us the complete history of the little brown book! What stories it might tell of father, son and mother, of gray Edinburgh, of the long wash of Pacific waves, of all the shine and color and alien charms of Vailima, if only its now yellow pages might murmur of the past. But it is something to possess it, to feel sure that it was handled, carried, often used by the man who has become to many of us something more than a distinguished writer, one of the chief ornaments of late Victorian literature; "that's the world's side." To the true-blue Stevensonian he is a friend and brother, listening to whose vibrant voice we are moved to deep love, and braced by whose sane and winsome doctrine of life we can face the struggle unflinchingly, and with a high heart.

RICHARD BURTON.